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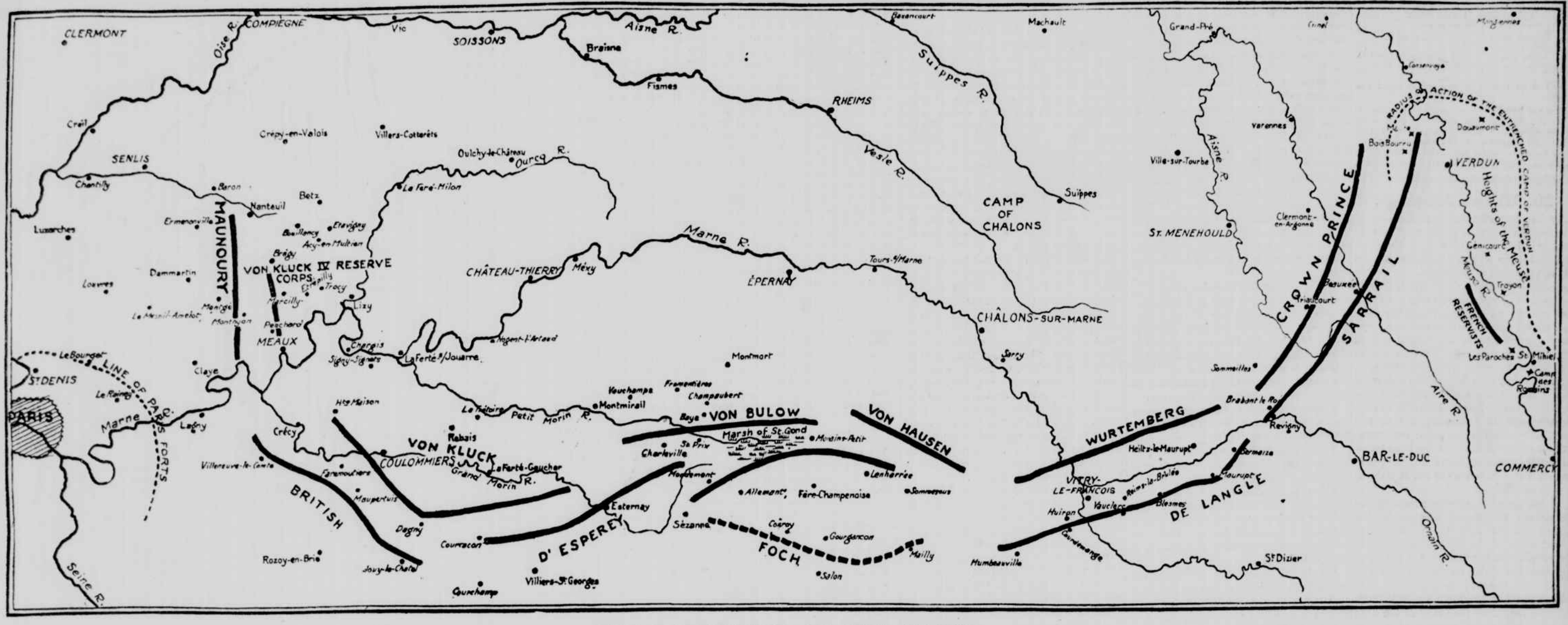
THE BATTLE OF THE MARNE—AFTER TWO YEARS



THE BATTLEFIELD OF THE MARNE

The positions of the armies are approximately those of September 6. The dotted line shows the final position of Foch on September 9.

By FRANK H. SIMONDS,
Author of "The Great War."

On September 5, 1914, at noon, a French battery of "75's" leaving the village of Iverny, something less than twenty miles due east of Paris and less than five from Meaux, suddenly came under the fire of a German battery, on the Monthyon-Penchard Hill, a little to the east. The captain was killed and the battery made a hasty retreat. These were the first shots fired in the Battle of the Marne. The next four days saw the greatest battle of modern history, fought by far more than two million men over a front of not less than one hundred and fifty miles from the environs of Paris to the forts of Verdun.

In this battle a German army, which had moved from victory to victory, whose marching flank had passed from Liège, through Brussels almost to the gates of Paris, was turned back, compelled to retreat, on one flank not less than seventy miles, leaving behind it guns, flags and prisoners. More than this, the decisive battle for which German military men had been preparing for forty years was lost, the promise of a swift, short and irresistible blow, which the violation of Belgian neutrality held out, was vitiated, the offensive was lost and a beaten army was compelled to dig itself into trenches from which it has been able to make no considerable advance during the whole period of the war.

The Miracle of the Marne.

This is what the French call "the miracle of the Marne." While it was going forward no detailed accounts were possible. After it was completed the great events that followed robbed it of public interest. Now, on the second anniversary, I shall endeavor to set forth briefly the story of the decisive phases of this battle as it was told to me on the battlefields by French officers a few months ago, or is disclosed in the French works, unhappily little translated as yet.

To understand the course of this gigantic struggle it is necessary first to dismiss the familiar legend that the French armies, which won the battle—the British contribution was insignificant—were ever routed. The battle was not the sudden rally of thousands and hundreds of thousands of soldiers who had been for days fleeing before a victorious enemy. It was the result of a clear, cool and deliberate plan, and it was in obedience to this plan that the several French armies, together with the small British force which fought at the Marne, had been drawn back from the frontier to the field of the conflict. The sole purpose of French strategy in the opening days of the war had been to keep these armies intact until the direction and nature of the main German thrust were disclosed. Incident to this plan Joffre had undertaken several minor offensives, in Alsace, in Lorraine and in Belgian Luxemburg. These had resulted in the defeats of Morhange and Neufchateau and the useless victory, after initial defeat, about Mülhausen.

All the armies engaged in these battles had retired to their earlier positions and made good their lines, repulsing all attacks. But the French army sent north toward Belgium, together with the British expeditionary force, had been beaten upon by an unexpectedly large German mass coming in three armies through Belgium. The French army had suffered defeat at Charleroi and had retreated in good order; the British army had almost found destruction, because upon it the full force of the German blow had fallen.

The Task of Reconcentration.

All this was clear to Joffre in the first days of the last week of August. The Germans, having the initiative, had elected to send a huge mass of troops through Belgium, and the troops were not discovered in full numbers until they had reached and passed the Franco-Belgian frontier.

But, starting about August 25, Joffre set himself to the task of matching his troops against the Germans, of reconcentrating his armies until he should have equal or superior numbers at the decisive point; he was never to have equal numbers at all points. While this reconcentration was going on he always foresaw a new French offensive.

About September 1 it looked as if the moment had arrived. He had assembled two new armies, one in the centre and one on the left, on the flank of the British, thus abolishing the peril that Kluck's army had had for him after Mons. On the line of the Somme, the Oise and the Aisne, from Amiens to Verdun, the French armies were ready, but unhappily the British army, having suffered disproportionately, had retreated too far. Therefore, despite local advantage in several conflicts, notably at Guise, Joffre determined on a new retreat. When this was accomplished his line would rest at either end on Paris and Verdun; his centre would curve south almost to the Seine. From this point he planned to attack the Germans.

This retreat, which began about September 1 and ended by September 4, placed the Germans in a difficult dilemma. In retreating south of Paris Joffre offered Kluck, on the German right, the chance to attack the city. It was a tempting bait, but Kluck wisely refused it. Such an operation would consume too much time and would require weakening the line elsewhere to get necessary numbers. But, having refused it, Kluck had no choice but to turn southeastward and march straight across the face of the forts of Paris. His objective was the left wing of the French field armies; the purpose of the whole German host was, of course, to smash the field forces of France.

Kluck Turns Southeast.

But Kluck's turn southeast was safe only if there were but a small garrison in Paris. If there was an army, then, when his front had got south of Paris, his flank and rear would be open to attack from this direction and he would be in exactly the position that the British had been in at Mons and at Cambrai. And as the British were on the end of the whole Anglo-French line from the Vosges west and it was thus exposed, so the whole German line would now be exposed.

We now touch on the first of the two determining circumstances of the Battle of the Marne, which in French history are known as the battles of the Ourcq and of La Fère-Champenoise, respectively. Kluck, in common with all German generals, seems to have been satisfied that the opening conflicts of the war had been decisive; he seems to have been sure that he had before him only beaten troops, and he had no suspicion of the fact that Joffre had concentrated before Paris a new and strong army, that of Maunoury, which was now prepared to strike on his flank as he had struck on the Anglo-French flank from Mons to the Oise.

It was in the evening of September 3 that General Gallieni, commanding the Paris camp, learned from his observers that Kluck's army had begun to turn away from Paris and was marching southeast from Senlis toward Meaux and the crossings of the Marne. He communicated the fact to Joffre by telephone, and in the next day there was arranged the plan which produced the Battle of the Marne. The credit for this plan is still disputed by partisans of the two generals. It was on the day following (September 5) that Joffre published his famous order announcing the moment to attack had come, thanks to the blunders of the enemy; that failures would not be forgiven and troops that could not advance must die on their positions.

The Maunoury Blow.

Actually, it was planned that the Maunoury army, emerging from the intrenched camp of Paris and moving due east, should attack the small flank guards which Kluck had left facing Paris, drive them east across the Ourcq River, which runs from the north down into the Marne above Meaux, and, passing the Ourcq, cut across the rear both of Kluck's and Bülow's armies. The mass of Kluck's army was far south of the Marne, in front of the British and the Fifth French army, under Franchet d'Esperey. A very good parallel for Maunoury's blow, as planned, is that delivered by "Stonewall" Jackson on Hooker's right at Chancellorsville.

To the British was assigned precisely the rôle that Napoleon assigned to Grouchy in the Waterloo campaign. Field Marshal French's army was expected to engage and hold Kluck's army while Maunoury struck its flank and rear. Kluck had two corps south of the Marne, facing the British, in addition to cavalry; the British had three corps facing the Kluck army, and on its right this army extended to the left of d'Esperey.

British Failure.

In this particular mission the British failed exactly as did Grouchy, and the consequence of their failure was the escape of Kluck and the restriction of the extent of the Allied victory. The failure seems to have been due to a total misunderstanding by Field Marshal French of the whole situation and an extreme caution which led him to ask for reinforcements from Maunoury's hard pressed army after he had permitted all but a cavalry screen of Kluck to retire from his front.

On September 5 Maunoury's army was on the move, one-half advancing straight against Kluck's flank guard, the 4th Reserve Corps, the other circling round from the north and aiming at the flank and rear of this 4th Reserve Corps. Maunoury had considerably less than 100,000 men at the outset; his army was doubled as the engagement proceeded, but it was made up of very heterogeneous elements, Algerian and Moroccan troops, reservists and only a few first line units. It had before it on September 5 not much more than 40,000 Germans.

The battlefield of the Ourcq is a broad, level plateau, stretching north from the Marne and ending on the east abruptly, where it falls down into the deep Ourcq Valley. To the eye it seems perfectly level, save for two wooded hills, a few miles east of Meaux, the hills of Monthyon and Penchard. It is cut by several brooks, contains a number of small villages, but is without walls, hedges or anything that would offer great obstruction to troops or artillery fire. Several large farm buildings, recalling the Château of Hougomont at Waterloo, played a similar rôle in the battle.

Kluck's Quick Shift.

In the afternoon of September 5 this army of Maunoury advanced and came in contact with the German troops on the hills of Monthyon and Penchard. These hills were taken in the evening hours. By the morning of September 6 the Germans were recoiling toward the very edge of the plateau, with the Ourcq Valley at their backs. A number of villages were taken by storm, notably Barcy and Etrépilly, and the French from the north were able to threaten a flanking movement which promised to turn the 4th Reserve Corps out of their position.

But now comes the change. Kluck seems to have appreciated the full extent of the peril incredibly swiftly. By September 6 he was drawing his troops from the front of the British. Actually he was able to withdraw first the 2d (active) Corps and then the 4th (active) Corps, leaving only cavalry to hold the British. With these troops he counter-attacked Maunoury, threw him back materially on September 8, and on the next day bent the northern flank of the French army back until it stood at right angles to the rest of the line and on this day seemed destined to drive Maunoury back into Paris. On the night of September 9-10 the Paris garrison stood to arms and Maunoury's army waited anxiously for daybreak, still with orders to attack, but expecting attack and defeat. After three and a half days of fighting they were at the end of their strength.

When daylight came on September 10 the Germans were gone. For Kluck the retreat to the Aisne had begun, but it was not a retreat due to his own defeat. The first blow of the French had been parried, the failure of the British to retain even one corps of Kluck's army before them, their extreme slowness of movement, had permitted Kluck to reconcentrate his army, escape from the vicious position in which he stood when the battle began, had enabled him to throw back Maunoury's army, insure his retreat and to come within an ace of winning a decisive battle. The full story of this whole episode, save for the deletions of the censor, may be read in the authoritative words of that eminent French soldier, General Bonnal. It deserves reading because of the prevalence, in this country and not elsewhere, of the legend that the British army saved the French at the Marne.

German Line Dislocated.

If it had failed in its chief purpose, still the effect of Maunoury's attack had been to dislocate not only Kluck's army, but that of Bülow to the east, the army which had won Charleroi and now faced the Fifth French army along the Grand Morin, south of Montmirail and east to the marshes of St. Gond. This army drew back to keep its alignment with Kluck, heavily pursued and fighting many minor engagements. Right across the battlefields of the famous Napoleonic campaign of 1814, Montmirail, Vauchamps and Champaubert woke from a century of peace to new carnage. But the fight between d'Esperey and Bülow was not to the finish, because Bülow was compelled to retire to keep his junction with Kluck. Hence this part of the whole battle of the Marne is of relatively minor importance.

To the east of d'Esperey was the army of Foch, which now played the decisive part. This army stood, at first, with its advance guards on the north side of the famous marsh of St. Gond, a strange swamp full of stagnant ponds and crossed by only a few highways. This was a considerable military obstacle. Behind it ran a line of hills, north of the town of Sézanne and dropping away to the southeast, looking down on La Fère-Champenoise from the plateau of Euvy and losing themselves in the monotonous plain of the Camp de Mailly.

When Maunoury's attack compelled the immediate retreat of Kluck and the ultimate retrogression of Bülow, the German high command resolved to seek victory by a redoubled pressure upon Foch, who held the French centre. In a word, the Germans undertook to break the French line, the whole line from Paris to Verdun, and to break it at the exact centre, which was where Foch stood. Foch was heavily outnumbered, and, although he began on September 7 a brave offensive, he was steadily driven south and suffered great losses. The fighting here was the most sanguinary of the whole engagement; and there are ten thousand graves in the little town of La Fère-Champenoise alone.

French Centre Driven Back.

Nor was this the worst. Not only was Foch driven south, but his right or eastern flank was driven very far south, until his army, instead of facing north, faced nearly east, and a wide gap began to open in the whole French line between Foch and the French army of Langle de Cary to the east.

September 9 is here, as at the Ourcq, the decisive day. On this day Franchet d'Esperey, having cleared Bülow from the banks of the Petit Morin and finding his 10th Corps freed by Bülow's withdrawal to the northwest, toward Kluck, lends this corps to Foch, and it now begins to act on the western flank of the German centre.

This aid assures the safety of Foch's western flank and he now withdraws his 42d Division from this flank, transports it eastward to Linthes and very late in the afternoon suddenly launches it in a terrific drive at the Prussian Guard between the marshes of St. Gond and La Fère-Champenoise.

At this point the German line has been thinned as a result of the eagerness of the Germans to press their advantage to the south, where they are at the point of piercing the whole French line about Gourgançon. The 42d Division goes through the Guard as a knife cuts through cheese, as the French afterward explained; it throws the Saxons in and about La Fère-Champenoise into disorder which becomes a rout, for Foch at the same moment launches a general attack.

"The First Strategist in Europe."

This tremendous thrust earned for Foch Joffre's verbal decoration as "the first strategist in Europe." It routed the Prussian Guard, which lost most of its artillery; it crumpled up the flank of the two Saxon corps, it routed the whole army of Hausen, who was forthwith retired in disgrace. It resulted in the wild retreat of the whole Hausen army as well as that of the Prussian Guard. Here, and only here, was there anything approaching a great battlefield triumph. Bülow had retired with little or no disorder, Kluck had retrieved his earlier reverses, and at the moment when Foch struck his blow was winning the Battle of the Ourcq.

But the retirement of Kluck and Bülow and the disaster which had overtaken the German centre, under Hausen, together decided the fate of the battle. It was on the receipt of news of this disaster that Kluck started his rapid retreat to the Aisne, that Bülow at last gave over his effort to regain control of the north bank of the Marne, which he had too hastily abandoned, and from Paris to Vitry-le-François the German armies all took the homeward roads.

To the East.

It remains very briefly to mention the incidents to the east. Here, behind the Ornain, the army of Langle de Cary stood for three days rigidly on the defensive, beating off German attacks, made by the army of Würtemberg on a front from Vitry-le-François to Revigny. More physical destruction was done here than anywhere along the battlefield, and the ruins of Sermaize supply evidence of the fury of the Bavarians. But, like the battles around Montmirail, these contests were without issue, because the decision at La Fère-Champenoise ultimately compelled the Bavarians to retire.

As for the army of Sarrail, standing from Revigny north to Souilly, where it touched the positions held by the garrison of Verdun, it resisted all attacks of the army of the Crown Prince, operating east of the Argonne, to penetrate its front and isolate Verdun. It had a bad moment when its rear was threatened along the Meuse at Forts Troyon and Liouville by a drive coming from Metz, but the garrisons of these forts held out until aid came, and the destruction of the bridges of the Meuse proved sufficient to bar the Germans.

For the armies of Kluck, Bülow and Hausen the day of September 9 was decisive, and as early as September 6 the first two were in partial retreat. But both the Würtemberg army and that of the Crown Prince held on for several days more and retired in good order in the end, when the recoil of the armies to the west made their retreat necessary to keep the alignment. Of the five German armies only those of Kluck and Hausen actually put forth their whole strength, and of these only that of Hausen was decisively beaten. Of the French armies only those of Maunoury and Foch were engaged to the limit, and Maunoury failed to accomplish his purpose because he did not get the help from the British that was expected.

The Taxicab Legend.

Had the plan conceived by Joffre or Gallieni, or by both together, been realized, the Germans would have suffered a decisive defeat and would have been unable to remain in France. Had Hausen been able to break the French centre, even after Maunoury's attack and the retreat of Kluck and Bülow, the Battle of the Marne would have ended in a decisive victory for the Germans and the French army would have been cut in two, one fragment driven in on Paris, the other on the barrier fortresses to the east.

There was a time when it was generally believed that the Battle of the Marne was won by the operations near Paris, and there is a legend of a victory won by the transport of troops through Paris in taxicabs. The troops were transported in taxis, but they arrived not in time to win the Battle of the Marne, but only in time to save the Battle of the Ourcq. Equally fallacious is the story of the British part in the battle. The British were never actively engaged in the battle at all, they never had anything but rear guards to deal with, and these rear guards held them up until the chance for a supreme success had totally disappeared.

It is open to question whether Foch would have been able to deal his decisive blow if Maunoury's thrust had not compelled the retirement of Bülow, by making Kluck draw his corps north of the Marne and west of the Ourcq, thus dislocating the whole German front. But it is not open to question that the blow of Foch was decisive. It was delivered by a beaten army almost at the last gasp, an army which had been recoiling under pressure for three days and had suffered losses that amounted to extermination in the case of some of its units. American army officers who visited the battlefield before the bodies had been removed will some day supply conclusive evidence of the bitterness of this conflict as measured by the carnage.

French Losses Greater.

No estimate of total losses, of prisoners, of booty, has ever been published. But it seems conservative to estimate that of the 2,250,000 men engaged between Verdun and Paris there were probably more than 300,000 killed or wounded. The French loss was not less than the German; it may have been more, for the French in many fields did the attacking. Certainly between the opening of the campaign and the end of the German retreat after the Marne the French losses exceeded the German—the losses in killed and wounded—while the prisoners taken by the Germans in the various fortified positions, Maubeuge, Longwy, etc., were very much greater.

It is reasonably certain that the Germans outnumbered the French on the battlefield, but owing to faults of concentration and deploying the French certainly got much more out of their inferior numbers, while the Germans seem to have handled their masses badly and to have suffered from an excess of numbers at certain unimportant points.

The consequences of the battle were wholly misunderstood at first by both the French and the Germans. The French believed that they had won a victory which would turn the Germans out of France. The Germans believed that they had merely suffered a minor reverse and that after a new concentration they would be able to take the offensive again and renew their bid for a decision. Both illusions perished at the Aisne. Here the Germans were able to repulse the French and dig in, but on their side they never were able to get on their feet and advance again.

German Strategy Wrecked.

Actually the Battle of the Marne broke the German offensive, wrecked their whole strategy, which was to bring the French to a decisive battle in the first six weeks of the war, win that battle and put the French out of the war. They advanced to the Marne seeking a second Sedan, and the French there won a Gettysburg. All the original German conceptions were definitively defeated in this battle; they were compelled to retreat, to give over the offensive, to accept a long war. But, save for the Saxons of Hausen, they were nowhere routed, and they were able within a week after the decisive day of the Marne, September 9, to halt the Allies along the Aisne, establish their front unbroken from the Aisne to the Meuse, and

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